

Teaching During A Pandemic In Assam: The Gender Dynamics

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Abstract

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in India brought into forefront many pre-existing problems with the different aspects of our society. This paper seeks to focus on problems in the education system brought into limelight from Assam, India. In particular, it is a study on the difficulties faced by the young female teachers (aged 25-35) working in contractual and/or permanent positions in educational institutions (at school and/or at college/ university) who had to drastically adapt to online teaching due to the lockdown imposed because of the pandemic in the country. It is based on personal in-depth interviews and engagements with my peers from the region who were juggling both research work and academic duties as well as household responsibilities throughout the lockdown. The location of the study is equally important as India's northeast was dealing with problems of digital divide, problems of ICT implementation, problems with technological problems as well as contractual employment of female teachers and salary related issues even in the pre-pandemic era. These problems were further escalated during the pandemic and as it has gradually become apparent to us by now, the implications were even more severe for the female gender in the third-world countries. This study seeks to work in the direction of identifying the gender dynamics of online teaching during the pandemic era where the boundaries of workplace and domestic spaces became blurred and gender restrictions on movement and access to public spaces almost became a norm once again.

Keywords: Online Teaching, Female Teachers, Work from Home, ICT

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I. Introduction

The Covid-19 outbreak in the first quarter of 2020 brought the entire world to a standstill. In India, country-wide lockdowns were announced in March, 2020. Quarantine measures meant offline education came to a major halt and educational institutions all across the country had to adopt online methods to continue with teaching, learning and assessment. In normal circumstances, designing an online course follows a systematic instructional design process with careful consideration of the target learner groups as well as the chosen instructional medium (Reiser, 2001). It includes the collaborative efforts of a course team comprising of academics or teachers, instructional designers, technicians and the product includes multiple learning objects such as lecture videos, assignments, discussions to meet the different criteria and objectives set by the academic institution (Brown & Green, 2019). This was not the case in 2020 as there was no time for preparation of systematic instructional designs or building team based support systems. As such individual teachers had to take up the challenge alone to teach online with minimal or almost no support from their schools; the task became even more difficult where they were remotely working from home. The experience of rapid online adoption of teaching has revealed many of the deficiencies of the education in Assam, located in India's Northeast.

Area of Study

This study focuses on using activity theory as the lens to understand the nature of the rapid institutional transition into online teaching and its impact on the pedagogical experiences of the young female teachers in Assam, India during the lockdown period of the year 2020. It is a working paper in the direction of identifying and reflecting upon the impact of COVID-19 on gender and education in India.

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The three research questions are as follows:

1. What did the individual teachers' teaching activities look like prior to the COVID-19 crisis?
2. How did individual teachers adopt and experience online teaching activities during the COVID-19 crisis?
3. What were the major dilemmas and challenges experienced by individual teachers during the COVID-19 crisis?

II. Literature Review

Before the COVID-19 crisis, there was a minimal number of publications on the adoption of online teaching as emergency measures (Lee et al., 2022). But now there is fast growing COVID-19 related literature that has provided many insights to the present study. During this tough time of COVID-19, the concern of educational institutions is not the quality of education, rather how institutions will be able to adopt online learning (Carey, 2020). As Rahman (2021) points out, such a sudden shift with minimum or no digital infrastructure, no previous training and preparation on use of digital platforms, the teachers of the country started scrambling to finish off their syllabi online through trying different online pedagogical approaches. Consequently, video conferencing and online meeting platforms such as Zoom, Cisco Webex and Google Meet saw a huge usage spike. Other mediums including LMSs and social media platforms like YouTube, WhatsApp, Facebook and so on, are also being used profusely.

However, students considered online classes during COVID-19 not engaging and difficult due to network and bandwidth problems and favour a blended learning approach with 30% of online and 70% of face-to-face education (Sreehari, 2020). Molise and Dube (2020) on the basis of their key findings argued that the teachers should adjust their teaching plans, assessment details and teaching materials and adopt new ways of interacting with learners through emergency online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. It has been highlighted across the extant literature that the success of an online course depends greatly on the quality of the teacher, who plays the most critical role in many aspects. Bao (2020) offers five factors that influence effective online learning experiences: effective instructional design, adequate instructional delivery at the appropriate pace, timely feedback and guidance from teachers, and high-quality student participation in learning activities.

Selwyn (2014) argued that teachers are supposed to be capable of acting as guides and/or facilitators with extensive digital competence. The Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge Framework (TPACK) of Mishra and Koehler (2006) identified technological knowledge (TK), pedagogical knowledge (PK) and content knowledge (CK) as must for any effective digital learning. Watermeyer et al. (2021) also report the results of a survey of 1148 academics that highlights the different challenges that academics experienced during the emergency online migration of their practice (e.g. increased workload, decreased working conditions, and disturbance of confidence and trust); that academics were "bruised by their experiences of emergency online transition" (p. 637) and state that academics' responses are "a story of trauma in the face of Pandemic" (p. 637).

III. Data and Methodology

To systematically analyse changes in teaching and assessment activity during the COVID-19 pandemic, this paper employs the activity theory as its theoretical framework (Engeström, 1999). As Lee et al (2022) points out, activity theory strives to conceptualize complex relationships between collective endeavor and individual action. By doing so, it enables educational researchers to locate individuals' practice in a broader systemic context. The term activity refers to collective and sustained human effort: the related actions (time-bound pursuit of goals) and operations (unpremeditated adjustments to circumstances) are used to carry the activity out. The major idea is that systems develop historically, with current forms arising from antecedents and further developing into new forms. The engine of activity development is often contradictions within activities that human subjects, who experience them as dilemmas, strive to overcome. Contradiction is the key notion of activity theory, referring to structural tensions and conflicts that develop over time within and between activity systems ((Engeström, 2001).

In the context of this study, activity theory allows us to position disparate aspects of the education and teaching activities in Assam during the COVID-19 pandemic within a coherent whole, understand that whole as a dynamic system full of dilemmas and contradictions, and compare how the system changes before and after the adoption of the contingency measure. As such, this qualitative study conducts an analysis of the dilemmas experienced by the young female teachers while adopting emergency online teaching. The qualitative data was collected through personal interview and in-depth conversations with five female teachers teaching (subjects-social science, economics, political science, geography respectively) in government primary and secondary schools in Guwahati, Assam. All of them had never taught online before the pandemic, although their levels of technological skills and experiences varied. The personal interviews were conducted over a period of five months and both in English and Assamese.

Context and Issues

The educational institutions in Assam has historically been dependent on the traditional mode of education, i.e. the classroom teaching method across all levels of education in the education system. The teaching environment consists of teachers and students within the four walls of the classroom and the lecture method is followed where the teacher explain the concepts with the help of blackboard/whiteboard. Use of modern teaching methods with ICT is still an uncommon feature of many government and even private schools at the primary and secondary level in Assam. Use of computers, internet and projectors for teaching requires electricity facilities as a given which is still not available at all in some regions of the state. Even in the metropolitan cities, use of digital platforms for education like ICT has begun in few of the higher educational institutions. The traditional method which is inherently cheap and easily available is followed across the state. Even assignments and exams are all conducted on paper and in offline mode. Face to face interaction in the classroom environment is the norm in our state (Borkotoky & Borah, 2021).

There has been several research projects conducted in Assam regarding online teaching and learning, particularly after the outbreak of the pandemic. However, most of the research papers are based on quantitative studies, particularly on survey of students. Even the few articles that focus on teacher's experiences do not concentrate on the pedagogical transformations of the educational institutions and its short and long term implications. Moreover, the teachers who shouldered the largest burden in this transformation with limited guidance and support from their institutions are yet to find a significant voice in the available extant literature on education in Assam. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the enforced lockdown necessitated the rapid shift to online teaching learning and assessment methods. Teachers from Assam along with teachers all over the country at various levels began to shift towards online mode of education to continue teaching. Prima facie, the major challenges faced included – technological issues, socio-economic factors, digital proficiency, disturbance caused by family members or pets, lack of supervision and so on. There were also privacy and security related issues linked to using digital platforms.

When the educational place is transferred to the home, work and family processes are in same space, which blurs the boundary between work and family field. The female teachers were also affected by increased household tasks due to multiple reasons including lockdown, suspension of house helpers/ service, increased expectations of family members and many more. At the professional and financial front, salary deduction, job layoffs, delay in salary payment etc. for those in contractual teaching job and its affect is still unaccounted for in studies. Global research on gender and pandemic have already pointed out that the immediate online shift added more stress and workload to female teachers who are struggling to maintain a work life balance in the domain of teaching, research, home responsibilities, taking extra care during the pandemic and so on (Houlden and Veletsianos, 2020). The disproportionate division and societal gender differences also affected women's social, economic and political life. Most women reported facing deterioration in their wellbeing due to greater responsibilities in personal and professional life activities.

As evident from the interactions with the participants of this study, they had no prior knowledge or experience in online teaching and learning and its delivery methodologies. This required the teachers to learn how to use ICTs independently and seek help from others. Further the associations among work overload, parenting stress, work-family conflict and job satisfaction in case of young females are still unexplored in the context of Assam. The psychological challenges of anxiety, depression, uncertainties owing to the lockdown coupled with the task of taking online classes and handling young children over online platforms affected both personal and professional development of the female teachers under the pandemic as identified by studies from across the world. As scholars of educational studies have reiterated, female primary and secondary school teachers represents a special group who shoulder the dual role of teacher and a guardian for their students. The post-covid literature on effect of the pandemic on teaching and learning have shown, the workplace was transferred to the family, in addition to work role overload, female teachers faced the family role stress of managing their own domestic roles in the household. As such investigating female teachers' work and experiences could provide further insights into the gender dynamics of online teaching in the special working context.

IV. Findings

The respondents when asked about how prepared were they to deliver online learning, teaching and assessment, the answer was almost unanimously 'no'. They also revealed their lack of confidence to facilitate online classes and highlighted the poor support their respective institutions in undergoing the transition. The most preferred online platforms were Zoom, Google Meet and even WhatsApp. The Covid-19 crisis brought forward a very pertinent issue of network connectivity issue prevalent in all of India's Northeast region. A majority of the respondents also raised the concern of not being able to effectively access appropriate technologies to support online classes. Internet connectivity problems in India's northeast was a common detriment for all the respondents. Further, lack of access to public spaces and only being locked in the house had its own repercussions. Overall, the

female teachers pointed out that their workload increased dramatically both on the teaching and domestic work front.

For the overwhelmingly majority of respondents in this study, the move to online means was viewed negatively. They felt their pedagogical role was reduced to fulfilment of rudimentary technical functions which was didactic, transmissional and therefore regressive. The teachers also had to support and help students who were frightened and upset and turned to the teachers for help. The education system of Assam has conveniently never had any student support services even prior to the pandemic. Thus, the teachers have always been sort of the first and perhaps only point of contact even during the lockdowns and had to thus assume levels of responsibility for their students welfare, that exceeded their expertise and training. Undertaking this duty, for a majority of the respondents without or with at best limited mental health training, felt problematic because they themselves were adjusting to the challenges of working from home while accommodating the general workload intensification.

The respondents also found it challenging to attend to the needs of huge groups of students in an online and yet home based environment where the lines were blurred. There was mostly no work-life balance as the female teachers had to perform both household responsibilities and teaching almost simultaneously during the day. The female teachers reflected that their male counterparts had it easier than them in terms of home care responsibilities and attending to child-dependents. The female respondents expressed their frustration and even resentment for not being able to adequately cater to neither of the roles. They expressed the invasiveness of, and exhaustion suffered from the expectations of their institutions of being digitally accessible around the clock to the students which cost both their personal wellbeing and professional development. Further, those among the respondents pursuing research and teaching simultaneously prior to the pandemic, reported a cessation in their research due to the intensified teaching commitment. Overall, the respondents expressed the need for better recognition of the impact of the pandemic on their psychological and emotional health.

Post-Covid Insights

After the completion of the study in 2022, we asked the respondents to review the paper and by this time, all the educational institutions in Assam had reopened fully. The teachers and students returned to the classroom back to the physical mode of teaching. We enquired with the respondents about their experience of this return. In response they revealed that they are comparatively happier to be back to work with their fellow teachers and to be teaching face to face with their students once again. They also spoke about how quite a number of female students from poor economic background had dropped out. There was seemingly a lag in the learning of the students on the lessons imparted through online education which the teachers are trying to cover in parts again as well. The teachers unanimously agreed upon the fact that Covid-19 showed the state's education system's real capacity for response and innovation which needs to be improved significantly. As such, the state needs to revamp the teacher training and capacity building programs with respect to usage of educational technology as well as to handle emergency situations. On the personal note, the teachers hoped that they never have got through such a crisis ever again.

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